

VZCZCXYZ0000
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHUL #0987/01 0940854
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 040854Z APR 07
FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3703
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2282
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2388
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUALSFJ/COMUSJAPAN YOKOTA AB JA
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J2 SEOUL KOR
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J5 SEOUL KOR
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA SCJS SEOUL KOR
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC//OSD/ISA/EAP//

C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000987

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2014

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KS](#)

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT ROH: RIDING THE FTA'S WAVE OF SUPPORT

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) In the two days following the announcement that the U.S. and Korea had reached an agreement on the KORUS FTA, support for President Roh Moo-hyun has seen a sizable jump in polls. Although the current jump in support may give Roh more room to arrange the much desired inter-Korean summit, it remains to be seen how Roh will balance the desire to craft his legacy with the shorter term goal of helping a progressive candidate win the presidential election in December. Despite the generally popular support between ruling and opposition parties, the majority of National Assemblymen remain undecided on their opinion of the deal.

SHARP RISE IN POLLS

¶2. (SBU) President Roh Moo-hyun is basking in the comfort of popular support, the likes of which he has not seen since the first quarter of 2005. Current polling numbers indicate a rebound in support from 13.4 percent in January to 29.8 percent this week. Similarly, Roh's disapproval ratings dropped from 80.1 percent to 60.1 percent in the same period. The new-found support is closely linked to the successful conclusion to the KORUS FTA talks which ended earlier this week. General support for the agreement is reported to be at 52.6 percent with opposition at only 35 percent.

MANY IN NA STILL UNDECIDED

¶3. (SBU) While many in the public are getting behind the agreement and President Roh who led its charge, members in the National Assembly remain guarded in their support for the deal. In the current 296-member parliament, the GNP holds 127 seats, Uri holds 108, and the Uri splinter group holds 23 and the rest are minor opposition parties. In order to be approved, the FTA requires more than half of the 296 assembly members to be in attendance and the endorsement of more than half of those present. In a survey of 282 lawmakers, 88 legislators, or 31.2 percent, supported the deal while 66 lawmakers or 23.4 percent opposed it. The remaining 117 respondents said they were undecided on whether they would

support the deal or not. This bloc of 41.5 percent of undecided lawmakers said that more time was needed to properly evaluate the measures the government plans to implement to protect disaffected farmers.

¶4. (SBU) Within the respective parties, the lines of support are only marginally clearer, with more support among GNP than Uri legislators. 51 of the GNP lawmakers along with leading presidential hopefuls Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye, are in favor of the deal while 14 are opposed. In the pro-government Uri Party, 28 lawmakers said they are willing to approve the bill. Kim Geun-tae and 23 other Uri lawmakers oppose the FTA, the poll said. Within the splinter group that broke away from the Uri Party, 15 lawmakers said they have not decided their position while two support the FTA and four are opposed.

FTA'S MAKE STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

¶5. (SBU) In addition to the expected support from Roh loyalists within the Uri Party and the majority from the GNP camp, Rep. Cho Soon-hyung from the minor opposition Democratic Party (DP) has also come out in favor of the deal.

Rep. Cho was quoted as saying that he admired President Roh for his determination to give the go-ahead to the top negotiator to clinch the deal. "The President's decision is especially honorable in that he risks undermining his political support from farmers and civic group," he said. These are unusually supportive words considering Rep. Cho played a leading role in the impeachment campaign against President Roh in 2004 when Cho served as the Chairman of the DP.

¶6. (SBU) While the FTA may have brought some unusual political forces together, most pundits expect the FTA to deepen the rifts in the ruling Uri Party. Kim Geun-tae said "The act of reaching the deal damaged national self-respect. It is an outright betrayal to the middle and low-income citizens." Chung Dong-young took a less aggressive stance by saying "The results fall short in terms of national interests and benefits to the economy for ordinary citizens." Former Prime Minister Han Myeong-sook said "I praise the government's efforts to do its best to wrap up the negotiations. Now that the deal has been reached, the government and the National Assembly should make efforts to pursue national interests responsibly."

WILL ROH CAPITALIZE ON SUPPORT?

¶7. (C) At this point in his tenure, President Roh has most certainly learned that periods of popularity are usually short-lived and based primarily on the issue at hand. Looking to seize the opportunity of the current support, many expect Roh will once again raise the Constitutional amendment bill, maybe as early as next week. In doing so, Roh takes an enormous risk as his previous attempt to support the amendment led him to some of his lowest approval ratings.

¶8. (C) In addition to the amendment, Roh still feels that an inter-Korean summit would lend some legitimacy to his time in office. Roh hopes to get on par with former President Kim Dae-jung whose legacy was greatly upgraded as a result of his 2000 summit in Pyongyang. Certainly, Roh's new found support from the FTA has increased his political clout. Moreover, given the recent warming of relations between North and South and visible progress in the Six-Party Talks, experts predict that the GNP is not in a position to directly oppose a summit.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) The FTA represents a rare shift in political alignment resulting in major political figures and civil society regrouping outside of party lines. The FTA is likely

to remain a key issue throughout the fall session of the National Assembly and in the run-up to the presidential elections in December. For now, President Roh and the GNP are mutually enjoying the benefits of popular support but this cannot possibly continue. In all likelihood, Roh and the GNP will part ways as they use this new-found capital for their own purposes, especially toward placing their own person in the Blue House.

VERSHBOW